

Facilitator's Guide

Beyond Trauma: A Catholic Guide for Spiritual First Aid

Best practices for leading an effective small group

- Prepare, but don't worry. Be familiar with the booklet and have a plan for your group. You do not need to be a trained counselor or professional to facilitate. The materials are designed in a peer-to-peer format.
- Your job is to keep things moving while monitoring the pace and protecting the space. This is **not** the time to teach, preach, counsel or advise. Your role is to create and maintain a small group space where participants can engage with the material and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, do their own inner work. Do not shortchange the time you allot for the "For Reflection" section in each session.
- This booklet can help you as well. While you are encouraged to participate in the individual assignments, do not neglect your primary role as facilitator.
- The small group format can be scheduled in a variety of ways, but we suggest taking it one chapter at a time over a period of weeks—one or two chapters per week.
- After trauma, people are overwhelmed and not able to think clearly. Don't give too much information. Speak more slowly than you usually do. Pause to give people time to understand what you are saying.
- Use silence. Silence creates space for participants to share a feeling or thought. The more emotion someone expresses, the more silence it deserves before moving on.
- Don't be shocked by what is said. Don't overreact to, or minimize, the way participants might be thinking or feeling. With trauma, people will often say things out of fear, frustration, confusion, or pain. They should be able to do that here.

However, be ready to privately ask a participant to seek professional help if that person indicates that they are thinking about hurting themselves or others, or they are frequently unable to handle their emotions or cope with life. Have contact information for mental health professionals and services on hand before you begin.

- Pay attention to the group dynamic. If a "talker" is dominating the conversation, say "Let's make sure we provide time for others who might want to share." If a "fixer" offers someone advice or a solution, gently point out that, "It is best for each of us to find our own way forward with God's help. Let's save advice for other settings."
- Some members may not feel comfortable sharing in a group setting. Verbally remind everyone that, "You are free to Pass or Play" before every discussion. Never call on someone to share or ask, "Cheryl, is there anything *you'd* like to say?"

Participants will not remember what is said as much as the *kind of experience they had* in your group. The *most* important thing to remember is this: people need to have a way to begin expressing their feelings in a safe place. They need to be heard and be assured that what they are feeling and experiencing is normal. The key word is—**listen**.

How the *Beyond Trauma* booklet is designed

The sessions in this booklet contain helpful information, Scripture passages, and reflection questions. Several sessions contain activities that can be done *before* the next meeting. If you prefer participants to read the material ahead of time, then you can review the main topics when you gather and invite them to identify what stood out. If your group has 8–12 people, sessions can be discussed in 60 to 90 minutes. Look for ways they can help lead.

Welcome

Use this material as way of introducing the notion of trauma. Explain that trauma can come in many forms: death, disease, layoffs, family dynamics, economic hardship, substance abuse, and more. Acknowledge that everyone has a different reason for participating in this group. Then take the group through the material. Point out that everyone’s reactions to trauma and pain will be different, and they may experience things that they never expected. This is normal and will disappear over time. Make sure to spend a moment with Pope Francis’s spiritual message. Use the Welcome to move right into Lesson 1.

Session 1—“Why am I feeling this way?”

The point of this session is to shed light on the feelings and behaviors generated by trauma and to give participants an opportunity to identify trauma’s impact on them.

Session 2—“How can I calm these strong emotions?”

Here participants learn how to intentionally relax and calm their emotions. Your task is to find a way they can actually practice the four exercises during the session.

Session 3—“Why do I feel so sad?”

This session features a helpful description of the “grief journey” and invites everyone to reflect on their own experience of this journey. It also introduces the Catholic spiritual concept of the Paschal Mystery: the natural process of pain, loss, and new beginnings.

Session 4—“How can my wounded heart heal?”

Two important concepts here: 1. Heart wounds, like physical wounds, require special care to heal. 2. Telling your story of trauma is an essential step toward healing. Prepare ahead so that you are ready to have everyone practice using the three listening questions.

Session 5—“How can I relate to God in this situation?”

This is a session of prayer. First, it introduces the spiritual practice of lamentation and gives participants time to write their own lamentation to God. Secondly, it invites everyone to ask for God’s help by symbolically “taking their pain to the Cross.” Prepare ahead!

Session 6—“Looking to the future”

This session asks everyone to identify key takeaways from the program and introduces them to spiritual practices that can help them continue to grow *beyond* trauma.